

**From the March 1, 2000 Newsletter
of the
Serra Club of South Palm Beach County, Florida**

Serra Club welcomes Father Joe Uhen of Peruvian Diocese of Piura

Thanks to member Jim Beck, whose sister works for the Church of Peru, our club was blessed by the presentation by Rev. Joseph William Uhen of the Archdiocese of Piura, Peru. Upon request, Fr. Joe sent me additional background information on his call to vocation. His letter to me was extremely interesting, as you will note below. Some of the details were related in Father Joe's talk, but more were provided in the letter.

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Peace, Jack. I have finally found time to sit down and trace the steps in my vocation. I may even answer some of your questions along the way.

I was born into a deeply religious family in the Milwaukee area and when my little brother's kindergarten class appeared on a children's TV program, he was asked what he wanted to be. "A policeman," he said. My grandmother said she enjoyed seeing him on TV, but wished he would have said he wanted to be a priest. I was about 7 or 8 years old when I took note of that esteemed calling.

Three years ago I traveled to Rome (as did my whole family) to be the "padrino" of my little brother's priestly ordination (Fr. Tim lives in Washington, D.C. and is a member of Opus Dei).

I still have fond memories of my first communion at St. Dominic's Parish in Milwaukee, but we eventually moved to Oklahoma City where I began 5th grade at Christ the King School. My family has lived there ever since (now more than 30 years).

One morning our pastor, Fr. Ernest Flusche came to our house and gathered all the children in the living room. My mother was not there. He said he was sorry but that my Dad had died of a heart attack that morning (I was 12 at the time).

I graduated from McGuinness in 1976. High school was the most awkward social period in my life. The 70s were a time of social and religious upheaval and, though it was a time of discovery, it was not an easy time in which to grow up.

McGuinness esteemed Notre Dame University and I was invited to be accepted. My four years at Notre Dame were the most important years of my social and religious maturing. I found myself within a

healthy life-giving group of friends and whatever awkwardness existed during high school was now transformed into the joy and confidence and a real hope about all the good that life beheld.

Though I was not fully aware of it, Our Lady of the Golden Dome was watching over this young man. I fell in love for the first time and, brief though it was, it opened a world of feelings and tenderness that continue to allow me to appreciate and understand the interior life of others. Twenty years later, I still keep in touch with many of my friends from Notre Dame.

I graduated with a BA in psychology. During my senior year, theology was offering the viable answers to my questions and my faith was being prepared to be lifted up to another level. Fr. Hesburgh and the Notre Dame environment were big on social justice and third world concerns and my dreams of owning a Maserati and having a luxurious penthouse apartment were traded in for the providential life of a pilgrim.

The priest, who years ago told me that my Dad had died of a heart attack, eventually invited me to his parish in Ponca City where I spent three years working with him as a pastoral agent and youth minister.

My spiritual life grew considerably and I discovered Mother Teresa and her call to the poor. I also discovered St. Francis of Assisi, the rich young man who traded in everything for the Gospel.

That parish helped me get a Master's degree in Spirituality from the University of San Francisco.

Then I went to Mexico and lived in a shack with a poor family for about 3-1/2 months. I was discovering the meaning of poverty and I once again was discovering the powerful presence of God.

From Mexico, I flew to the Bronx where I spent a year working as lay director for one of Mother Teresa's soup kitchen shelters. The Missionaries of Charity were for me an extraordinary education in holiness and service and the Catholic faith. Priesthood was always on the back burner, but now it came to the fore and I entered the Missionary of Charity Fathers, a group that was being formed at the time.

At one point Mother Teresa asked me how I was doing and I told her that I was "very dark." She

explained that there is pain that is physical and she pinched my arm, then she said there is pain of the soul too, and this is far greater than physical pain. She looked at me, realizing that I might not stay with her priestly missionary group and said, "But don't lose your vocation." I spent four more years with the group, but discerned that diocesan and not religious life was my true calling.

The decision led me to the mission in Santiago Atitlan in Guatemala, where I prayed in the room where Fr. Rother was murdered. I studied theology at the Jesuit University in Guatemala City.

A few months in El Salvador and prayers in the chapel where Msgr. Oscar Romero was assassinated were significant milestones in my emerging call to be a diocesan priest among the poor.

A Mexican Franciscan priest advised me to go to Jerusalem and study in the Biblical School and, like a pilgrim, I did.

Then I made my way to Rome to finish theological studies and to learn as much as I could about Pope John II. Growing up in the United States when I did, a great deal of suspicion was leveled against "Rome" and the "Vatican." But, my personal experience of the Roman Pontiff and the Magisterium left me thoroughly impressed

Then I made my way to Peru. I was always intrigued by Peru because of the threat of the Shining Path guerillas. Several foreign priests had been killed there and I was ready to give my life over "without counting the cost," as Mother Teresa would say.

I sent a letter to the bishop of Piura and he invited me to come. I was ordained on April 1, 1995. My life here is a dream come true as I am offered myriad opportunities everyday to realize my priestly mission of sanctifying people and empowering the poor to further the Lord's Kingdom among us.

Sometimes when I have lunch with a family who lives in a poor shack, they tell me, "I never thought I would have a priest in my home."

Peru is the birthplace of Liberation Theology and there are some exciting perspectives that appeal to the faithful here. But, I do not find in these people the same fiery aggressive pursuit of justice that is common in say, San Salvador. There is great respect for Church teaching and the people are hungry for the truth. Perhaps like many in the U.S. there faith is a given.

—Peace, Fr. Joe

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When Fr. Joe spoke to us, he told us that his parish has 20 chapels (15 of which are bamboo and thatch). He celebrates nine Masses on Sundays, and on given Saturday, baptizes 20 or more babies into the

faith. Every six weeks 100-plus adults complete the RCIA program. Fr. Joe teaches at the archdiocesan seminary two days each week. If you think Fr. Joe is busy, you would probably be right on!

The Archdiocese of Piura is about 550 miles north of Lima (the capital) and the climate is very hot, never cold. The region is very poor.

In 1965, agrarian reform was initiated, with the government taking from the wealth and giving to the people. Many of the rich have fled, and with no capital and little confidence that what they develop would remain theirs, there is a reluctance to build an economy.

Fr. Joe reminds us that "Catholicity transcends poverty, economics, politics, etc., and while charity is important, prayer and faith are more important."

The president of Peru has eliminated terrorism, and the situation has been stabilized. Fr. Joe again says, "God is with us!"

